

Anna Funder was born in Melbourne in 1966. She has worked as an international lawyer and documentary filmmaker. In 1997, she was writer-in-residence at the Australia Centre in Potsdam. *Stasiland*, published by Melbourne's Text Publishing, is her first book. She lives in Sydney.

The fall of the infamous Berlin Wall in November 1989 precipitated by a peaceful revolution against Erich Honecker's "bankrupt, geriatric" East German regime not only heralded a remarkable turning point in modern German history, but also fully exposed one of the most complex, bizarre and total state surveillance mechanisms ever imposed upon any civil society: that of the dreaded East German Stasi or secret police.

At the height of their powers, the Stasi comprised a vast network of informants drawn from every layer of society, involving an estimated ratio of at least one informer for every 6.5 persons in the former GDR. As Anna Funder elaborates: "The Stasi was the internal army by which the government kept control. Its job was to know everything about everyone, using any means it chose...it was a bureaucracy metastasized through East German society...reporting to the Stasi on their fellows and friends in every school, every factory every apartment block, every pub..."

While the fall of the Wall brought with it revelations of the all-pervasive extent of Stasi surveillance and concrete evidence of their vast empire in the guise of a mountain of hastily-shred documents and files, the true impact of this apparatus on East Germany's ordinary citizens would take many subsequent years to unravel.

Accordingly, while many "celebrated cases" would later emerge attesting to the shocking, bizarre and almost implausible acts committed by Stasi 'operatives' in the name of state protection, the destruction wrought amongst the lives of ordinary East Germans remained, to some extent, sadly ill-documented and under acknowledged in the reunified Germany. Indeed, it is largely at this point that Funder's *Stasiland* takes up the story in an attempt to document and understand the lives of both victims and protagonists in the aftermath of the Stasi maelstrom.

Undoubtedly central to the genesis of *Stasiland* was Funder's encounter with a woman named Miriam Weber which later provided the impetus for

some powerful storytelling throughout the pages of the book. At just sixteen years of age, Miriam Weber was officially proclaimed an Enemy of the State and later sentenced to one and a half years in Staubeurg women's prison for attempting to escape to the West by going over the Wall.

Miriam's extraordinary story also sets the scene for our introduction to a number of intriguing, curious and often bizarre encounters as Funder painstakingly pursues her "adventures in Stasiland." Thus we encounter Herr Bock whose major passion was recruiting prospective Stasi operatives; Herr Bohnsack who trained as a journalist and worked in Stasi 'disinformation' for 26 years; Herr Winz, a counter-espionage specialist who worked in the Ministry in Potsdam from 1961-1990; and the exuberant Herr Hagen Koch Secretary-General Honecker's personal cartographer responsible for "redrawing the limits of the free world."

In stark contrast, we encounter Klaus Renft, East Germany's own 'bad-boy rocker' whose band the Klaus Renft Combo became the hottest ticket in the East, known widely for screaming out their version of Mick Jagger's trademark Satisfaction, "'A ken't get nö zetisfektion.'" Like many under the old regime, Klaus and his band were ultimately considered ideologically unsound and a possible threat to the security of the state.

Having been called in Ministry of Culture in Leipzig in September 1975 to have their performers' license renewed, Klaus and his outspoken fellow band members were declared by the regime to be *persona non grata* and instructed by the Ministry's Comrade Oelschlägel that - "We are here to inform you today, that you do not exist anymore."

Stasiland is undoubtedly creative non-fiction at its most riveting best. Indeed, it is also testimony to Funder's curiosity, tenacity, and novel-like story telling ability that sustains the intensity and engagement with such dark and gripping themes.

Despite the gravity of the stories told by the former Stasi men, Funder's methodology in seeking them out, making contact, and ultimately interviewing them was deceptively simple: through placing an advertisement in the personal columns of a Potsdam newspaper *Märkische Allgemeine* Funder invited "...former Stasi officers and unofficial collaborators for interview. Publication in English, anonymity and discretion guaranteed." Before long, the telephone began ringing and former Stasi men were

offering to speak with her in anticipation that a detached Australian writer - “someone from the other side of the earth”- might somehow be prepared to let them speak fairly for the record.

Stasiland undoubtedly succeeds in putting a human face to both sides of the story. Funder’s initial interest in the stories behind the Iron Curtain of the GDR regime were first sparked when she received a letter whilst working for a West Berlin television service as “a cross between an agony aunt, free research assistant and receptacle for messages in a bottle.” The work involved responding to a range of letters from viewers, when one letter came across her desk suggesting the idea of a story on the “puzzle women” of the Stasi File Authority assigned to reconstructing the Stasi files that were destroyed during the collapse of the Honecker regime.

Fired by an insatiable desire to tell the stories of both victims and perpetrators alike, *Stasiland* undoubtedly reflects Funder’s unquenchable desire to expose the consequences of her “adventures in Stasiland;” where truth really was stranger than fiction. As Funder reflects: “It was an extremely strange world and I spent day after day in the company of people who were still either dreaming of it or dreading it or living with the consequences. In that sense it really was adventures in Stasiland.”

So what were some of Anna Funder’s conclusions having delved into this extraordinary world: no doubt if she has to single out the principle conclusion it would be “...that human beings really are extraordinary.” And with this conclusion there can surely be no argument.

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